A Relook on Doklam Standoff

What is the issue?

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- In August 2017, after a 73-day face-off in Doklam, India and China announced disengagement of border personnel from the site.
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- It has been a year since then and this article tries to relook at the events.
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How did the face-off begin?

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- Dolam Plateau is located in the Doklam area in Bhutan and lies in close proximity to India (Sikkim) -Bhutan-China tri-junction.
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- The Chinese Army entered the area with road construction equipments in June 2017, and asserted the claim that the region was Chinese territory.
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- In this context, Bhutan had formally launched a diplomatic protest complaint against China and also stated that its sovereign territory is being violated.
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- Further, this was seen by India as a threat for its own borders and an assault on Bhutan (whose security has been entrusted with India).
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- With the Chinese refusing to heed to Indian calls for a retreat, a tense faceoff on Dolam plateau between Indian and Chinese soldiers commenced.
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What factors played to heighten India’s concerns?

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- India’s concern largely reeled from the fact that China unilaterally intended

to alter the status quo by aggressively building infrastructure.
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- Notably, there is ambiguity on the territorial jurisdiction of a stretch of land in the tri-junction, and an interim understanding exists currently.
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- Further, the Doklam region is also very close to the strategic Siliguri corridor (or chicken neck corridor), that connects North East with rest of India.
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- This had caused New Delhi to be extra anxious in the Doklam aggression.
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How did negotiations proceed?

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- PM Modi met Chinese President Xi on July 2017 (while the confrontation was going on) on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Hamburg, Germany.
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- In this conference, it was the leaders had stressed that matters can be resolved only through diplomatic channels and subsequently negotiations were started.
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- Notably, both sides were conscious of the importance of ending the face-off before the BRICS Summit in Xiamen, scheduled in September 2017.
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- **Negotiations -** India had stated that the Sikkim's border with China wasn't a settled one and that Doklam was a sovereign territory of Bhutan.
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- Several rounds of talks followed and both countries agreed in the "Astana Consensus" that differences should not become disputes.
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- After weeks of talks, an agreement to resolve the situation was reached and disengagement of border personnel happened in late August 2017.
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- **Aftermath -** On its part, India willingly took the first step to break the impasse by removing its troops first and returning them to initial positions.
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- The Chinese removed troops, equipment and tents from the construction site, and thereby dropped any plans of building a southward road in the region.
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- But it did not bring the Chinese troops back to the status quo as they continue to remain deployed in northern Doklam where they were earlier absent.
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What were the previous incidences in Doklam?

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- The 1st recorded incidence of Chinese entering Doklam (Bhutan) was in 1966, when India sent a protest on Bhutan's behalf.
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- Such intrusions had become regular in the past two decades and India always gets involved as it is handling Bhutan's foreign policy.
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- In 2007, Chinese patrol troops had even destroyed India's self-help bunkers in the region and there were some escalations.
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- Nonetheless, 2017 Doklam intrusion by China was unique as it had a massive contingent of 80 (usually its 10), and had also planned road construction.
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How does the future look?

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- Tensions between India and China have subsided to a great extent following an informal summit between Modi and Xi in Wuhan (May 2018).
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- Both leaders agreed to provide "strategic guidance" to their militaries, which has since largely reduced the possibility of confrontation.
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- India and China are also slated to hold a series of dialogues on settling the border question through special representatives and ministerial level talks
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- Notably, Chinese Defence Minister recently visited India and stressed the need to stepping up strategic communication between the two countries.
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Source: Indian Express

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